



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

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June 25, 2008

The Honorable Gordon Smith
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Christopher Dodd
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Smith and Dodd:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, to thank you for your leadership in introducing the Healthy Transition Act of 2008, critical legislation which would provide needed assistance for youth who are transitioning from youth to adult mental health systems.

As you know, half of all lifetime cases of diagnosable mental illness begin before age 14, and three fourth by age 24. Left untreated, mental health problems often contribute to delinquency, substance abuse, high-risk sexual behaviors, school dropout and violence. For vulnerable youth - including teens in foster care, homeless youth, and those with significant emotional disturbances - the transition to adulthood presents an especially unique challenge. These teens have likely experienced traumatic life events, physical or emotional abuse, chronic poverty, stress, homelessness, emancipation, or spent time in the foster care or juvenile justice systems. For many youth, the day-to-day struggles they face are further compounded by frequent service disruptions and what many view as a pervasive lack of critical resources and supports to help them navigate the transition to adulthood.

According to the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, a long list of programs – approximately 55 federally-funded programs – provide critical health and social support services for youth and families, including mental health services. Yet the majority of federal programs for vulnerable youth are not designed to assist teens as they transition to adulthood. In fact, many programs, including foster care, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) end eligibility for services at age 18. For instance, foster youth age out of care at age 18 and for many, eligibility for Medicaid ends at that time. In addition, a significant percentage of foster youth - 12% to 36% - experience homelessness, having few resources to turn to in order to secure adequate housing on leaving foster care.

An abrupt discontinuation in services is especially problematic for youth with serious mental or emotional disturbances, who need intensive and continuous services to help them make the successful transition to adulthood. Left untreated, youth with serious emotional disturbances will likely resurface in the juvenile justice or adult criminal systems. In fact, a 2004 report by the minority staff special investigations division of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government

Reform found that two-thirds of juvenile detention facilities surveyed hold youth who are merely waiting for community mental health treatment.

First Focus supports efforts to coordinate care for teens with serious emotional disturbances and improve continuity in care as they transition to adulthood. We are pleased that the Healthy Transition Act provides grants to States to assist adolescents and young adults with a serious mental health disorder in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to ensure their healthy transition to successful adult roles and responsibilities.

We are grateful for your leadership on this issue, and for all of your efforts to ensure that our nation's most vulnerable children, youth and families receive essential service and supports. Thank you again for your support, and we look forward to working with you on this and other proposals to address the needs of our nation's youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent "B" and "L".

Bruce Lesley
President